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# General Assembly

Fifty-third Session

*Official Records*

73rd plenary meeting
Monday, 30 November 1998, 3 p.m.
New York

*President*: Mr. Opertti ..... (Uruguay)

*In the absence of the President, Mr. Chkheidze (Georgia), Vice-President, took the Chair.*

*The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.*

**Agenda item 39**

**Question of Palestine**

**Report of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (A/53/35)**

**Report of the Secretary-General (A/53/652)**

**Draft resolutions (A/53/L.48, A/53/L.49, A/53/L.50, A/53/L.51)**

**The Acting President:** I first give the floor to Mr. Ibra Deguène Ka of Senegal, in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, who will introduce draft resolutions A/53/L.48, L.49, L.50 and L.51 in the course of his statement.

**Mr. Ka** (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (*interpretation from French*): I am greatly honoured once again to open the annual debate in the General Assembly on the question of Palestine in my capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate Mr. Opertti on his election as President of the Assembly and on the way in which he has guided our work at this session.

As the Assembly is aware, the item on the question of Palestine was reintroduced in the agenda of the General Assembly in 1974 when, after many years, it became apparent that the question of the fate and the rights of the Palestinian people had been overshadowed by inter-State conflicts. This question was not at that time among the issues discussed by the international community. The inclusion of the question in the agenda resulted above all from the recognition on the part of the international community at that time that the Arab-Israeli conflict could not be resolved peacefully until the question of Palestine — the core issue of the conflict — was settled equitably and on the basis of the recognition and exercise of the inalienable national rights of the Palestinian people.

The Assembly has defined those rights unambiguously and, in resolution 3236 (XXIX), adopted at the twenty-ninth session, it reaffirmed that they included Palestinians' right to self-determination without external interference, their right to independence and national sovereignty, their right to return to homes from which they had been displaced and uprooted and their right to recover their property. In resolutions ES-7/3 and 35/169 A, both adopted in 1980, it also reaffirmed the right of the Palestinian people to establish its own sovereign independent State.

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After so many years, and despite endless debates and the adoption of countless resolutions and declarations by the Security Council and the General Assembly, many other United Nations bodies, intergovernmental organizations and Governments, the dream of an independent Palestinian State has still not been realized.

Despite the hopes that were raised around the world by the agreements signed in 1991 and 1993, increasingly dark and heavy clouds have come to loom over the peace process, and numerous obstacles have impeded the process to the point of jeopardizing the achievements that were built up between 1991 and 1996.

Today, more than 50 years after the partition of Palestine, almost half of the 7 million Palestinians still live in refugee camps with no possibility of returning to their homes and villages or of being compensated for the loss of their property. Their economic problems and constant insecurity, the punitive raids against them and the psychological suffering of this people may not perhaps hit the headlines, but they should serve as a reminder of the historical injustice that has been done to the Palestinian people.

Since 1967, some 350,000 settlers have established themselves in the occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem, in continuous violation of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which clearly stipulates that the occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.

The creation of settlements has intensified in recent years, and it is continuing relentlessly. East Jerusalem has been illegally annexed and surrounded by colonies that not only cut it off from its natural hinterland in the West Bank but separate it from its Arab population by means of the establishment of extremist settler enclaves. Thus, Al-Khalil, a Palestinian town of over 100,000 people, had to be divided in such a way that 30,000 people must live under occupation so that just 400 settlers can remain there in complete security.

Land continues to be confiscated not only to allow for new settlements and for the expansion of existing ones, but to enable bypass roads to be constructed linking the settlements to each other and to Israel. The occupied territory is gradually being fragmented into a patchwork of separate zones that can be closed and easily controlled by military force. The prolonged closure of the zones under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority and the constant denial of free passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip significantly disrupt the daily lives of Palestinians and cause serious damage to the young Palestinian economy. Such measures also undermine the credibility of the peace agreements, create mistrust between the parties and give rises to serious doubts about the possibility of reaching an understanding at a time when confidence-building measures should be given pride of place.

Throughout those long years, and despite all the suffering that they have endured, the Palestinian people have never despaired. They have continued steadfastly to believe in the justice of their cause and have patiently appealed to the international community to help restore their inalienable rights.

The historic compromise of 1993, which is based on mutual recognition by the two parties and the establishment of a negotiating process aimed at implementing Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) and in which the Palestinians participate as full and equal partners, was an important milestone. The agreements achieved since then, including the recent Wye Memorandum, show that a diplomatic solution that takes into account the rights and needs of both parties is indeed possible.

The sporadic incidents of violence by extremists on both sides who are opposed to reconciliation and the signing of agreements only underscores the need to act diligently and resolutely in order to bring about a just and peaceful settlement. It is clear that if such a settlement is to endure, it must be widely accepted and cannot be imposed by one side to serve its own interests. Israel's understandable security concerns will not be properly addressed by unilateral actions, in particular by building settlements. Such measures, which dispossess Palestinians of their assets and deprive them of their rights and well-being, do not foster a climate of confidence or an environment conducive to peaceful coexistence.

Our Committee, which was established to assist in achieving a just settlement of the Palestinian question that would enable the Palestinians to exercise their rights, has always welcomed the peace process as a historic step in the search for peace. We have endeavoured to assist by carrying out our mandate while continuing to press for the full exercise by the Palestinian people of its inalienable rights in accordance with international law.

We wish to express our deep gratitude to the many Governments and international organizations from around



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the world that have assisted us in our work this year, in particular the Government of Belgium for hosting the international Conference in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, in Brussels, the Government of Egypt for hosting the International Meeting of Non-Governmental Organizations and the seminar on assistance to the Palestinian people, in Cairo, and the Government of Chile for hosting the Latin American and Caribbean Seminar and Symposium on Non-Governmental Organizations, in Santiago.

Our gratitude goes also to the Government of Italy for offering to host the Bethlehem 2000 international conference in Rome next February and to the Government of Namibia for offering to host the African meeting in support of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people in Windhoek in April next year.

We will continue to cooperate with all Governments, intergovernmental organizations, United Nations bodies and non-governmental organizations in their efforts to promote the just and peaceful settlement that we all desire until such time as the Palestinians can gain the seat that is rightfully theirs among the member States of the Assembly.

As Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, I should like to draw the attention of the Assembly to the four draft resolutions that have been circulated under this agenda item: A/53/L.48, A/53/L.49, A/53/L.50 and A/53/L.51. I wish to inform the Assembly that Algeria and Mali have joined the sponsors of the four draft resolutions.

The first three draft resolutions relate to the activities, respectively, of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, of the Division for Palestinian Rights and of the Department of Public Information. They reiterate the important mandates already conferred by large majorities in the General Assembly while seeking to take into account recent political developments and to build on recent experience in carrying out their programmes of work.

In accordance with the objectives of the Committee, we wish with these draft resolutions to ensure that our efforts in the coming year in support of Palestinian rights and of a just and peaceful solution to the question of Palestine are as useful and constructive as possible. We also intend to rationalize the use of our resources by targeting areas where our activities can be the most decisive, in cooperation, of course, with the relevant units of the Secretariat. Provision for the activities outlined in these draft resolutions is already included in the programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999.

The text of the fourth draft resolution, on the peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine, reflects the position of the General Assembly with respect to the central aspects of a settlement and reproduces the text of the previous resolution on this subject, while updating it to take into account, above all, the signing of the Wye River Memorandum and the hopes it has aroused.

These draft resolutions confirm positions, mandates and work programmes that are of particular importance at this crucial stage of the peace process. I therefore call on the General Assembly to give them even more massive support than that received by past resolutions.

**The Acting President:** I now call on Mr. George Saliba of Malta, Rapporteur of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, to introduce the Committee's report.

**Mr. Saliba** (Malta), Rapporteur of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People: It is an honour for me, in my capacity as Rapporteur, to present to the General Assembly the annual report of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

During the past year, the Committee continued to do its utmost to implement the mandate given to it by the General Assembly. This document covers the Committee's activities, as well as the new developments relating to the question of Palestine and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process since last year's report.

The introduction to the report is contained in chapter I, which describes briefly the Committee's objectives and concerns in the light of the evolving situation. Chapters II and III summarize the respective mandates of the Committee, the Division for Palestinian Rights of the Secretariat and the Department of Public Information and give information on the Committee's organization of work.

Chapter IV contains information on the situation relating to the question of Palestine, as monitored by the Committee in the course of the year. Although welcoming the signing of the Wye River Memorandum, which helped restart the peace process, the Committee expressed much concern at the worsening of the situation on the ground, including continued and escalating Israeli

settlement activities throughout the occupied territory, and in particular in and around Jerusalem. As was the case last year, the Committee was alarmed by the position of the Government of Israel on the question of Jerusalem in general, especially its plans for the creation of what has been termed a Greater Jerusalem umbrella municipality, settlement construction in the neighbourhoods of Jebel Abu Ghneim and Ras al-Amud, Israel's policy with respect to Palestinian residency rights in Jerusalem, demolition of Palestinian houses and the closures of and curfews imposed on the Palestinian territory.

The main body of the report is in chapter V, which gives an account of the action taken by the Committee in accordance with General Assembly resolution 52/49. It details the action taken in the Security Council and the General Assembly, including participation in the resumed tenth emergency special session of the General Assembly and the meeting of the Security Council on 30 June 1998. The Chapter also covers the Committee's initiative in requesting the inclusion of the item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" on the agenda of the current session of the General Assembly. The chapter contains information on the participation by the Committee Chairman in the relevant international conferences, meetings and summits, at which he represented the Committee, as well as on the results of his efforts.

Chapter V also describes adjustments made by the Committee in its programme of work in order to meet the evolving situation in the most effective and constructive manner, while keeping in mind the continuing financial constraints of the Organization. The Bureau continued its useful and constructive dialogue with the European Union. During the year, the Committee organized a number of important meetings, namely the high-level Conference in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and the subsequent European Symposium of Non-Governmental Organizations, both held at Brussels in February; the United Nations International Meeting of Non-Governmental Organizations on the Question of Palestine and the subsequent seminar on assistance to the Palestinian people, both held at Cairo in April; the Latin American and Caribbean Seminar and Symposium of Non-Governmental Organizations, held at Santiago in May; and the North American Symposium of Non-Governmental Organizations, held at Headquarters in June. In this context, I would like to take this opportunity to express our profound thanks to the Governments of Belgium, Egypt and Chile for providing the venues and for facilitating the holding of these important events.

This chapter also provides information on the activities of the Division for Palestinian Rights in the areas of research, monitoring and publications, on the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL), and on the assistance given for the electronic conversion of the records of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine. It also contains information on the training programme for staff of the Palestinian Authority in the workings of the United Nations. Finally, the chapter describes the 1997 observance of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

Chapter VI covers the work of the Department of Public Information in accordance with General Assembly resolution 52/51, including the publications and audio-visual activities of the Department and other activities carried out by the Department.

Chapter VII, the last chapter of the report, contains the conclusions of the Committee and its recommendations to the General Assembly. The Committee notes that, despite the undeniable achievements of the peace process since 1993, the dispossession of the Palestinian people has lasted for over a century and the dream of a Palestinian State is still unfulfilled. Most of the Palestinian and Arab territories occupied by Israel in 1967, including Jerusalem, remain under occupation, vulnerable to exploitation of resources, land confiscation and encroaching settlements.

The Committee believes that, as humankind prepares to enter the new millennium, it is incumbent upon the co-sponsors of the peace process, the Security Council and the international community as a whole to do everything within their power to achieve peace and reconciliation in the Middle East, which is so essential for international peace and security.

The Committee is of the view that the policies and practices of occupation, which seek to create actuality on the ground and to alter permanently the demographic composition of the occupied territory, violate the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and statehood and make the achievement of real peace impossible. The international community, in particular the High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949, must intensify efforts to ensure protection for the Palestinian people, pending the achievement of a final settlement.

The Committee reaffirms that the United Nations has a permanent responsibility with respect to the question of Palestine until a satisfactory settlement based on international legitimacy is reached. The Committee reiterates that the involvement of the United Nations in the peace process, both as the guardian of international legitimacy and in the mobilization and provision of international assistance for development, is essential for the success of the peace process.

The Committee considers that its programme of meetings in the various regions and its cooperation with non-governmental organizations have played a useful role in heightening international awareness of the relevant issues and in achieving wider recognition of and support for the achievement of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. The Committee intends to continue to review and assess its programme in order to achieve maximum effectiveness and to respond adequately to developments.

The Committee supports the Bethlehem 2000 project launched by the Palestinian Authority. It requested the inclusion of an item on Bethlehem 2000 on the agenda of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly in order to mobilize wide international support for the event. The Committee is planning to convene a Bethlehem 2000 international conference at the Rome headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations next February, with the agreement and support of the Italian Government.

The Committee stresses the essential contribution of the Division for Palestinian Rights of the Secretariat in support of the objectives of the Committee and requests it to continue its programme of publications and other activities, in particular the further development of the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine and the completion of the project for the modernization of the records of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine. It also considers that the annual training programme for staff of the Palestinian Authority has demonstrated its usefulness, and requests that it be continued.

The Committee also considers that the special information programme on the question of Palestine of the Department of Public Information has made an important contribution to informing the media and public opinion of the relevant issues. The Committee calls for the strengthening of cooperation and coordination with the Department, and requests it to give particular attention to the preparation of audio-visual and other informational materials on the question of Palestine aimed at the general public.

Finally, the Committee calls upon all States to join in its endeavour to make the greatest possible contribution to the achievement of a just and lasting peace during the difficult times ahead, and invites the General Assembly again to recognize the importance of the role of the Committee and to reconfirm its mandate with overwhelming support.

I trust that the report of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People that I have just introduced will be of assistance to the General Assembly by facilitating its deliberations on this important issue.

**Mr. Kaddoumi** (Palestine) (*interpretation from Arabic*): I would like, at the outset of my statement, to extend our congratulations to the President on his election to the presidency of the General Assembly. We are confident that he will conduct the deliberations of this session with wisdom, and we trust in his ability to achieve the objectives of the United Nations to bring about peace and security. We would also like to extend our thanks to his predecessor, Mr. Hennadiy Udovenko, who so ably led the work of the previous session. We would also like to commend the Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, for his efforts and persistent endeavours to solve outstanding problems and questions and for his attempts to maintain international peace and security.

We wish too to thank the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and its Chairman, Ambassador Ibra Deguène Ka, for their persistent efforts to serve the question of Palestine, to ensure the rights of the Palestinian people and to put an end to Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.

We are once again discussing the question of Palestine, as we have year after year, because of Israel's rejection of the resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly and because of its failure to adhere to the agreements already reached. Political negotiations have been faltering since Mr. Netanyahu took charge of the Israeli Government. The peace process has now reached a deadlock. No substantive achievements have been made so far; on the contrary, they were submerged by details that took the peace process off its appropriate track. When the Arab parties concerned with the political settlement had accepted it, that acceptance was made on the basis of international legitimacy and the

implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), the principle of land for peace and safeguarding the legitimate political rights of the Palestinian people. Those principles and resolutions stipulate the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied Arab and Palestinian territories — including Al-Quds, which was occupied in 1967 — and call for ensuring the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and for exercising sovereignty over its territory.

The Madrid Peace Conference was held in 1991 to realize these objectives, and political negotiations began in Washington under the sponsorship of the United States of America and the Russian Federation. We hope that these objectives will be realized so that peace and stability may prevail in the Middle East region. However, Israel assassinated Mr. Rabin, and Mr. Netanyahu was elected and took power as Prime Minister.

Mr. Netanyahu insisted on returning to discussing the previous accords and agreements, in contradiction of international norms and covenants, in order to evade his commitments, to formulate new agreements and to impose a new fait accompli through pursuing the policy of confiscating land, building new settlements and expanding existing settlements. He has not even carried out the agreements that he himself signed. He began to procrastinate and waste time under the pretext that Israeli security was in jeopardy and that it was necessary to conclude security agreements. When those agreements were concluded he refused them, in spite of the fact that the United States had taken part in the drafting of those agreements through the participation of the Central Intelligence Agency and that it had become a party to them.

The Palestinian party insisted on the need for the Israeli Government to abide by its commitment to put an end to the settlements policy, the confiscation of Palestinian territory and the demolition of houses. We also insisted on the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from occupied Palestinian territories in accordance with the Oslo agreements, which stipulate that Israel must withdraw from the West Bank in three phases. However, when the meeting at Wye Plantation was held, this still had not taken place.

During that period, Mr. Netanyahu continued the economic and security blockade of the Palestinian people and even tightened it further. He pursued his terrorist and repressive practices, disseminating false allegations that the Palestinians threatened the security of Israel. Despite its active diplomacy over the last two years, the United States was unable to convince the current Israeli Government to implement the agreements already reached or to adhere to the principles and bases upon which the peace process was founded.

Furthermore, through a decision adopted on 14 January 1998, the Israeli Government has defined what it considered to be vital Israeli interests which it will not concede in either interim or permanent agreements. That decision was published at that time in the semi-official Israeli newspaper, *The Jerusalem Post*. Those interests included the western and eastern security zones, Jerusalem and its environs, areas of Jewish settlements, water and electricity infrastructures, security and military installations, roads from north to south and from east to west and Jewish places of worship. All of this took place before the well-known meetings between Mr. Clinton, Mr. Netanyahu and President Arafat on 20 and 22 January 1998. The Israeli Government confirmed that it will keep these areas under its control when it endorsed the Wye Plantation agreement.

After difficult negotiations at Wye Plantation, the negotiators reached an agreement for the partial redeployment of the Israeli army from Palestinian areas. That agreement stressed the security issues associated with combatting terrorism and violence and called on the Palestinian people not to undertake such practices. However, it unfortunately failed to mention the Israeli occupation, the biggest of all evils and the root of all acts of violence and terrorism. Yes, indeed, once that occupation is brought to an end, security and stability will prevail.

Israel, owing to its occupation of the Palestinian territories and its policies and practices of oppression and terrorism, is the party that should be condemned — not the Palestinian side, which is defending not only its rights but its very survival and existence. The Palestinian people are subjected to abuse as a result of the practices of the occupying Israeli army and the Israeli settlers, who day by day usurp more land, establishing their own settlements and using arms to attack the peaceful Palestinian citizens, who are the indigenous inhabitants of the land.

The Israeli Government has contravened these Agreements, distorted them, changed their provisions, and imposed what they want, all under the nose of the sponsors of the peace process. Mr. Netanyahu did not hesitate to falsify historical facts and to allege that the

Jews had the right to all of Palestine, thus denying our right to sovereignty and self-determination after having occupied our land and our homes in all the Palestinian towns and villages. Now he is trying to obliterate our national identity.

Last September, when this session was beginning, Mr. Netanyahu spoke arrogantly before the Assembly. I shall quote from parts of his statement:

*(spoke in English)*

> "It can no longer be claimed ... that Israel is occupying the Palestinians. We do not govern their lives ... The territory we are negotiating about is virtually uninhabited by Palestinians ... Yet this land is the canvas on which thousands of years of Jewish history have been etched ... to part with one square inch is agonizing for us ... Every stone and every hill and valley ... resonates with our forefathers' footsteps" *(A/53/PV.13, p.14)*.

*(spoke in Arabic)*

This is the racist Netanyahu. Can one who says such words believe in peace? Does he even have the desire to find a peaceful solution? He had tried to falsify history in order to create historical legitimacy, even though Israel, historically speaking, was born only yesterday here in the United Nations.

Since 1967, the General Assembly and the Security Council have affirmed unanimously that the Palestinian territories, and first and foremost Jerusalem, are territories which are occupied by Israel and that the Fourth Geneva Convention is applicable.

It is well known that the Hebrew people passed through parts of the Palestinian land thousands of years ago. They lived there for only 150 years, whereas our Canaanite and Palestinian forefathers had established their civilization and been living there for tens of centuries beforehand — Jericho and Al-Quds are testimony to that. The Canaanite water channels recently discovered in Jerusalem are clear evidence of the authenticity of our people's civilization.

Netanyahu's political presentation shows clearly that the facts have been falsified and distorted. Everyone knows that the Israeli army is occupying the Arab and Palestinian territories, denying us our right to self-determination. This deprives our people of the right to sovereignty on their own territory. Israel has gone even further than that: it has bulldozed villages and built Jewish settlements in their place, after having displaced the Palestinians and prevented them from returning.

In accordance with the Declaration of Principles, Israel was supposed to implement all of its obligations during the transitional period by handing over 37 local administrative units to the Palestinians and returning 750,000 Palestinian refugees who had been expelled during the Israeli aggression of 1967.

A quadripartite commission, consisting of Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and Israel, met during the transitional stage to attempt to reach a solution. However, Israel has frozen the work of that Commission, and so far not one single displaced person has been able to return. Even the Wye River Memorandum, concluded recently, ignored this very vital issue.

Israel has retained control over all of the infrastructures and vital services such as water, electricity, telephone service, imports and exports. It has expropriated and confiscated land, built settlements and demolished homes. Many thousands of Palestinian freedom fighters are still detained in Israeli jails. This is not to mention the blockades and curfews which are periodically imposed.

Strange as all of this seems, the Israeli authorities still claim that they want to achieve reconciliation with the Palestinian people and the Arab people. It is also regrettable that the letters of assurance forwarded by the United States to the Israeli Government after the Wye agreement affirm that Israel alone can determine its security requirements and decide upon the appropriate solutions. This provision attests clearly to Israel's intent to renege on its commitments to uphold a United States pledge, particularly the implementation of the third redeployment phase, and that the second redeployment stage, if carried out, is the last. This means that Israel will keep 60 per cent of the Palestinian territories and will share with the Palestinian Authority the administration of 21 per cent of that area.

Is this the final solution from Israel's perspective? The conflict between us and Israel was never about institutions and administration but about land — our land — and our right to exercise our sovereignty on that land. This was the crux of the political settlement that was included in Security Council resolution 242 (1967), which calls for the withdrawal of Israel from all the

occupied Palestinian and Arab territories, including Jerusalem/Al-Quds. It is very strange that the declaration by the Palestinian Authority that it will establish its State is considered a unilateral act violating the Agreement while in Israel's view the settlements and the confiscation of Palestinian land, the construction of bypass roads and the demolition of houses do not constitute a unilateral action — despite the fact that such declaration by the Palestinian Authority is one of the conditions Yitzhak Rabin agreed to when United States President George Bush assured him that Israel would receive loan guarantees.

The Charter of the United Nations provides for the right of peoples to self-determination. Thus the United Nations resolutions have stressed the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent and sovereign State of Palestine. Security Council resolution 363 (1974) of November 1974 and Assembly resolutions 37/86 of December 1982 and 181 (II) of 1947 were adopted to affirm that right.

Israel claims that it is a democratic State. The Israelis engage in all forms of opposition and criticism, and some Israelis even go even further, demanding the expulsion of the Palestinians from their country. However, when the Palestinians exercise their right to criticize and express their opinions it is considered abetting violence and a call for terrorism.

Israel has violated human rights and practised persecution and racial discrimination against the Arab citizens in Israel. It continues to do so.

On 18 October 1998 an Israeli newspaper published an article that stated that international Jewish institutions are conducting negotiations with 23 countries in an attempt to either restore the Jewish property confiscated during the Second World War or to win compensation for these confiscations. To date, the article said, Germany has compensated the Jewish people by paying 200 billion deutsche marks.

However, the negotiators from the Jewish and Israeli groups do not give their opinion regarding compensating other parties whose property has been usurped. Is it appropriate for a State to ask for compensation for properties that were usurped when it usurps the properties of others and refuses to even consider their claims for compensation? Is there a difference between the land of a Palestinian peasant taken in Israel and the land of a Jewish peasant taken in Lithuania? Both of these farmers fled; they escaped or were forced to flee though they had not committed any crime. Is there any difference at all between a lost home in Jerusalem and a lost home in Warsaw? Dispossession is dispossession, usurpation is usurpation — they are unjust even if the circumstances are different.

The author of the article went on to say that, according to the statistics of a Jerusalem municipal official, the Palestinians had left about 4.5 dunums of land, and about 60 per cent of the houses in West Jerusalem were Palestinian homes, as were hundreds of thousands of housing units in towns and Palestinian villages. The article's author, who was deputy to the head of the Jerusalem municipality, goes on to say that the value of abandoned Arab property in Israel was estimated in the billions of 1950s' dollars.

Further, there are now about 700,000 refugees scattered all over the world. Most of them remain very needy people today. There are also 150,000 Arab citizens still in the country — present yet absent. They are refugees in their own country. Israel so far has not returned their property to them.

The author went on to say that maybe it was not yet time for compensation. Most of the Palestinians have yet to accept that any compensation be paid before negotiations are finalized on the return of the refugees, within the framework of a permanent settlement. This article is a testimony by an Israeli citizen.

*The President took the Chair.*

The return of refugees is a right consecrated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as in many other international instruments. Its international legitimacy has been confirmed by General Assembly and Security Council resolutions. The international legitimacy of the right of the Palestinian refugees to return has been established and confirmed through the United Nations resolutions. The Declaration of Principles agreement stipulated the return of people displaced by the Israeli aggression of 1967. However, Israel still refuses to implement this agreement.

The subsequent Israeli Governments, including the current one, have refused to return to the line of 4 June 1967, the truce lines, and consider Jerusalem the eternal capital of Israel within Israel's sovereignty. The Israeli Government says that never will this position be renounced, knowing that the Security Council has

unanimously called upon Israel to withdraw from Arab Jerusalem on the grounds that it is an occupied territory, according to Council resolutions 242 (1967), 465 (1980) and 478 (1980).

And here we also have to cite the position of the Holy See, as stated by Archbishop Tauran, Minister for Foreign Affairs for the Holy See, during the international conference of Catholic bishops held this October in Jerusalem to discuss that city's future. I quote:

*(spoke in English)*

> "The prevailing situation in the Holy City was brought about by force and has been preserved by force since 1967. A part of the city has been occupied militarily and subsequently annexed. East Jerusalem is illegally occupied. It is therefore wrong to claim that the Holy See is only interested in the religious aspect or aspects of the city and overlooks the political and territorial aspects. There is nothing to prevent Jerusalem in its unity and uniqueness from becoming a symbolic land, the national centre of both of the peoples that claim it as their capital."

This is what Archbishop Tauran stated at that international conference in Jerusalem.

(*spoke in Arabic*)

Here I recall the position of the United Kingdom, which was announced by Malcolm Rifkind, the former Foreign Secretary of that country, as follows:

(*spoke in English*)

> "Israel is in military occupation of East Jerusalem and has only de facto authority over West Jerusalem."

(*spoke in Arabic*)

These are substantive matters related to the question of Palestine and in regard to which there can be no concession, for without dealing with them there can be neither peace nor stability. Moreover, we have to take into account the hundreds of settlements scattered throughout the occupied Palestinian territories and the Israeli Government's intention to build more settlements after confiscating tens of thousands of dunums of Palestinian land.

Israel, by its policy and conduct, as well as by its actions, is sabotaging all chances for peace. The criteria are still different when the United States deals with the concerned parties. Were such unjust settlements to be imposed on the Palestinian people, that would never lead to stability, security or peace. This is because we believe that the continued occupation, injustice and oppression carry within them the elements of tension and explosion. The question of Palestine is the crux of the Arab-Israeli conflict. A just and comprehensive settlement cannot be achieved unless the Israeli occupation is completely eliminated from all occupied Palestinian and Arab territories, including Jerusalem/Al-Quds, and the refugees return to their homes to enable the other Arab tracks, which have been plagued with stagnation, to meet with success.

With the advent of the year 2000, both the past and the future will meet in Bethlehem — in Palestine — where there will be for all peoples one global vision of hope and peace. All voices will there rise to glorify God on high peace on earth, and happiness to the people. The world will commemorate the second millennium since the birth of Christ and the beginning of a new millennium. This is a historic and religious opportunity for all believers in the world and the international community as a whole — not only for the Palestinian people and the region. We are looking forward to effective participation by the international community in the serious preparation for this celebration of the commemoration of the birth of Christ beginning in 1999 and lasting until Easter in the year 2001.

The Lebanese and the Syrian tracks are still facing a deadlock. The Israeli Government persists in ignoring the agreements that were reached with the previous Government on the Syrian track and insists on starting *de novo*. Also, there are official declarations saying that the Golan is a strategic area that cannot be dispensed with, nor could Israel return to the armistice line of June 1967. Prior to this, the Israeli Knesset even decided to annex the Golan to Israel.

As for Lebanon, the Security Council adopted resolution 425 (1978), which stipulated an unconditional and immediate withdrawal of the Israeli forces from southern Lebanon. The Council also adopted resolution 426 (1978), which included a specified mechanism for the implementation of resolution 425 (1978) through the establishment of an international interim force under the command of the Security Council to verify the withdrawal of the Israeli troops and the restoration of

international peace and security as it had been before. However, Israel rejected the implementation of this resolution and manoeuvred by presenting counter-proposals, in addition to establishing a security belt under its command in southern Lebanon.

Here we have to refer to the fact that the continued blockades imposed on the Iraqi people and on the Libyan people will only increase tension in the Middle East region. This is at a time when the Arab peoples see that Israel owns weapons of mass destruction and is not accountable to anyone. Nor is Israel asked to implement the Security Council resolutions which now number, I would say, over 20 resolutions.

The security agreements that have been reached so far will not help the issue of peace and security in the region before a comprehensive and just settlement is reached. Peace can be established only by reaching a comprehensive and just solution that takes into account a balance of interests between the peoples and the States of the region, apart from bilateral or multilateral blocs. Such blocs carry within them the seeds of conflict and regional wars, which we do not need in such a very sensitive region, given its strategic importance and its location.

In such a region, wars can break out at any time as a result of the continued Israeli occupation of the Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian territories, the policy of security blocs and the blockade imposed on a number of States and peoples of the region. At the end of the cold war, there was an agreement to use peaceful means to solve regional problems and questions rather than resorting to military force or even the threat of military force. The United Nations, including the Security Council, has to consecrate these principles. Respect for human rights, the right of self-determination for the peoples of the region, non-interference in the internal affairs of peoples and respect for the national and regional sovereignty of peoples are real achievements which eventually allow for opportunities for further cooperation and peaceful coexistence among the peoples of the region.

In conclusion, I would like to affirm that the solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict lies in finding a just settlement of the question of Palestine, in accordance with international legitimacy. Thus, the United Nations and all of its specialized agencies continue to be the only appropriate forum for the question of Palestine and its only acceptable and legitimate reference.

**Mr. Sucharipa** (Austria): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. In addition, the Central and Eastern European countries associated with the European Union — Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia — and the associated country Cyprus, as well as the European Free Trade Association countries members of the European Economic Area, Iceland and Liechtenstein, align themselves with this statement.

After the impasse in the Middle East peace process, the signing of the Wye River Memorandum by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat in Washington on 23 October 1998 brought about the long-awaited breakthrough, which put the peace process back in motion. It has given rise to genuine hope that a just, secure and comprehensive peace in the Middle East is within sight.

The European Union recognizes the sensitivity of the issues negotiated at Wye River Plantation and congratulates the parties for their courage and high sense of responsibility, which allowed the successful conclusion of the talks. The European Union is of the opinion that the sustained political commitment of the parties and the determination to resist those attempting to frustrate the promising progress towards peace will lead to the full implementation of the agreement. This will help restore the mutual trust as well as the confidence of the parties to the peace process.

The European Union welcomes the steps undertaken by the parties so far to implement the Wye River Memorandum, especially in the field of security arrangements and the redeployment of troops. The Union would like to take this opportunity to call upon the international community to lend its full support to this promising phase in the peace process.

We are equally pleased with the inauguration of the Gaza airport on 24 November 1998. The European Union now calls upon the parties to complete negotiations as soon as possible on those remaining issues under the Interim Agreement still not settled — especially regarding the industrial zone in Karni, the Gaza port and safe passage between Gaza and the West Bank — and to fully engage with a spirit of cooperation and perseverance in final status negotiations.

In this context, the European Union strongly insists on the need to abstain from unilateral acts in the context of the Oslo and Madrid agreements, that could prejudge

the final outcome of the negotiations. We reiterate that the principles set out in Security Council resolution 242 (1967) and that the Fourth Geneva Convention are fully applicable to all the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem. In this regard, we consider settlement activities as illegal and an obstacle to peace. The European Union would also like to stress the importance of the commitment to the principles of democracy and to respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The President of the Council of Ministers of the European Union, Vice-Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, visited the Middle East from 12 to 15 November 1998 at a critical stage in the implementation of the Wye River Memorandum. This visit underlined the European Union's unwavering support for and determination to stay actively engaged in the Oslo process.

The European Union will continue to make constructive and effective contributions, including through its Special Envoy, Ambassador Moratinos, in order to restore and strengthen confidence between the parties. We are ready to be fully associated with the implementation of the Wye River Memorandum and to contribute to the final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

The European Union underlines the importance of progress in the peace process with a view to improving, *inter alia*, investor confidence and promoting the sustainability and greater self-sufficiency of the Palestinian economy. The European Union reaffirms its resolution to continue its economic and technical assistance. We will especially concentrate on helping to build a sound and prosperous economy in the Palestinian territory, aimed at facilitating social and political stability among the Palestinians.

With regard to support for the Palestinian people, we would also like to mention that, on 9 November 1998, the Council of Ministers of the European Union authorized the European Commission to negotiate the renewal of the Convention between the European Commission and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The new Convention shall allow important contributions to education, health and food-aid programmes.

We welcome the convening today in Washington of the Ministerial Conference to support Middle East Peace and Development. The European Union will take this opportunity to underline its continued commitment to the peace process through a renewal of its financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority. The European Union will also play a central role in the technical follow-up to the Conference.

In concluding, the European Union reiterates its firm commitment to a just and comprehensive settlement based on the Madrid and Oslo accords. We are determined to fully assist the parties in their efforts to bring about durable peace in the Middle East.

**Mr. Effendi** (Indonesia): As the twentieth century draws to a close, the question of Palestine, regrettably, remains a difficult challenge for the United Nations. The facts clearly testify that peace and stability in the region will continue to be elusive until the inalienable rights of the Palestinians to self-determination and independence are fully realized. Consequently, it is imperative for the international community to sustain its efforts in promoting the cause of peace until the Palestinian and other occupied lands in the region are returned to their rightful owners.

Indonesia, naturally, is gratified by the intensive efforts of all the concerned parties culminating in the Wye River Memorandum, despite setbacks, provocations and other formidable obstacles. As we all know, the Memorandum touches on five basic issues: further Israeli withdrawal from 13 per cent of the West Bank; steps to be taken in addressing security concerns; the reaffirmation of the peace process by interim committees; the recommitment of all parties to respecting international law during the transitional period; and the commitment to resuming final status negotiations.

Indonesia particularly welcomes the conclusion of the aforementioned Memorandum, because it offers a glimmer of hope that, after more than two years of a stalemate in the peace process, the talks are back on track. It is important at this critical moment in the history of the region that the provisions of the Memorandum be fully implemented in good faith and sincerity. This is deemed necessary so that it may replace the prevailing atmosphere of despair and tension with confidence and trust among the peoples of the territories and to provide the much-needed momentum to expedite the final status negotiations. In this regard, we consider the inauguration of the Gaza International Airport on 24 November 1998 as a positive step forward in the peace process and in symbolizing the consolidation of Palestine's sovereignty in its territories.

There can be no doubt that one of the principal obstacles on the road to a secured peace is the issue of settlements. These illegal activities have often in the past dealt a serious setback to the fragile peace just when we thought that peace would be given a chance to bloom and flourish. Thus, there should be no more hesitation to put an end to these illegal activities, as they are also in complete violation of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949, General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, as well as the relevant peace agreements.

At this juncture of our intensive and concerted efforts, it is important to keep reminding ourselves that the seeds of peace can take root and grow in the Middle East region only if they are based on the full implementation of United Nations and Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978), and on the principle of land for peace. The United Nations should remain seized of this item, especially in its capacity as a guarantor of international legitimacy, if a successful outcome of the peace efforts is to be achieved. Equally important is the pivotal role of the United Nations in the mobilization of international assistance for development as the Palestinians face the arduous process of nation-building. As history has demonstrated, emancipation without development is independence without substance. Therefore, it behoves the international community to marshal resources to help this nascent nation.

Finally, as the world is about to enter a new millennium, there can be no justification for prolonging this conflict any longer. We must collectively make unstinted efforts in relegating this tragic chapter of world history to the past by moving decisively forward and facilitating every endeavour whereby the state and the people of Palestine can finally live in peace, prosperity and harmony with its neighbours.

**Mr. Shen Guofang** (China) (*interpretation from Chinese*): Thanks to the concerted efforts of the Palestinian and Israeli sides, as well as the extensive support of the international community, marked progress has been made in the Middle East peace process since the Madrid Conference. Last October, Palestine and Israel reached an agreement on the second phase of the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the West Bank of the Jordan River. This represents an important step forward in the process of establishing self-rule for the Palestinian people. We welcome this development and hope that the parties concerned will carry out their obligations seriously, continue to adopt a flexible and pragmatic approach, implement the existing agreements in earnest, remove obstructions and push the peace process forward on the basis of the relevant United Nations resolutions and the principle of land for peace.

Since Palestine gained self rule, for reasons that everybody is well aware of, economic development in areas of self-rule has been far from satisfactory. The international community is duty-bound to provide stronger support and more assistance to the Palestinian people to help the Palestinian self-rule Government reinvigorate and develop its economy to improve its people's livelihood.

In recent years, the United Nations has played an increasingly important role in settling regional disputes and maintaining world peace. The Organization has made a tremendous contribution to the settlement of the question of Palestine and the question of the Middle East as a whole. In July this year, the General Assembly adopted resolution 52/250, "Participation of Palestine in the work of the United Nations". Palestine's observer status at the United Nations was elevated. We believe that the United Nations will play an even more active role in promoting the Middle East peace process and bringing about a final settlement of the question of Palestine and the Middle East.

The Chinese Government and people are very concerned about the development of the situation in the Middle East. We believe that the question of Palestine is at the core of the Middle East question. Only when the question of Palestine is resolved in a just and reasonable manner and all the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people are restored can Palestine and Israel enjoy real and lasting peace. We will, as always, join the rest of the international community and continue to work tirelessly for a comprehensive and fair settlement of the question of Palestine and the question of Middle East.

**Mr. Kittikhoun** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) (*interpretation from French*): Last year, at the fifty-second session of the General Assembly, like the majority of Member States, the Lao delegation expressed its concern over the grave deterioration of the peace process in the Middle East in the wake of the establishment of new settlements in Har Homa in East Jerusalem. Acts of violence, even killings, were committed, and even worse, armed clashes occurred, endangering the peace process supported and advocated by the international community. The parties lost their trust in each other, and a climate of tension and general

insecurity prevailed. Since then, the international community has continuously sought to encourage the parties concerned to make a greater effort to restore a climate of mutual trust and to seriously pursue their negotiations with the aim of achieving a comprehensive solution to their dispute.

On 23 October 1998, to everyone's satisfaction, the Wye Plantation agreement, after lengthy and laborious negotiations, was signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. We greatly commend the two parties for their courage, their spirit of reconciliation and their political vision, which made such an achievement possible. The deadlock that the peace process had experienced for almost two years was finally broken, and my delegation expresses the hope that the two parties concerned will implement this agreement fully and sincerely, which would open the way to a negotiated settlement of the question of Palestine, which has now existed for almost five decades.

There remains much to be done. The problem is complex and extremely sensitive, and it is important that both parties demonstrate wisdom, restraint and, above all, great patience in their relations in the coming months. In this context, my country, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, wishes them every success and good luck.

The question of Palestine is, of course, one of the thorniest questions of our times. However, we believe that this one like many other thorny problems the world faces, can be resolved, providing the parties directly concerned have the necessary political will to resolve it. The Palestinian people have already suffered too much, and the international community must do everything possible to assist the two parties in resolving their problems. It is true that the road to peace is not an easy one, because obstacles remain. However, the cause of peace is just and represents the ardent hope of the people of the region to live together, to cooperate and to coexist peacefully.

On 14 May 1948, the State of Israel was created. The international community today impatiently awaits the creation of an independent Palestinian state, a good and friendly neighbour of Israel, in accordance with the partition plan adopted by the General Assembly on 29 November 1947. It is with this spirit of optimism that my delegation sees the future of the Middle East region.

**Mr. Maruatona** (Botswana): It is common knowledge that the question of Palestine is the epicentre of the Arab-Israeli dispute. It is abundantly clear that without a comprehensive and just solution to the question of Palestine, prospects for peace and stability will continue to elude the Middle East.

The presence all over the Middle East of close to 3.5 million Palestinian refugees serves as a constant reminder, not only of the cruelty and tragedy of statelessness and homelessness, but also that a permanent solution must be found, and found soon, to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict if a catastrophe is to be avoided in the area. The Palestinian people still remain a nation of refugees despite the fact that they have a territory they rightly and proudly call their own. My delegation has over the years maintained that only the realization of the inalienable right of the Palestinian people will lead to a permanent solution to the question of Palestine.

The people of Palestine have a right to return to their homeland in safety and dignity. Their right to return cannot and must not be permanently treated as inherently inimical to the existence of the State of Israel. The existence of the State of Israel is a reality that cannot be wished away, and the Palestinians, like all peoples worldwide, are entitled to their right to self-determination on the basis of the United Nations Charter and the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and the Security Council.

It is sad that hostilities in the Middle East are between peoples that trace their origins to the same land, whose languages and cultures share an organic affinity, and for which cooperation in all fields of human endeavour would seem only natural. It would seem only logical that the Israelis and the Palestinians should be engaging each other meaningfully in the search for solutions to their dispute. It is not only in the interest of the Israelis and the Palestinians that peace and stability be realized in the Middle East; it is also in the interest of regional and international peace and security.

While the international community cannot shirk its responsibility for the expeditious resolution of the question of Palestine, the onus for the advancement of the peace process rests primarily with the parties to the conflict themselves. The Oslo agreements and the signing in Washington, D.C., in September 1993 of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, which provided for the phased withdrawal of Israeli forces and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, have laid a firm foundation for the

development of a culture of peaceful coexistence in the Middle East.

We call upon both parties, especially the State of Israel, to comply fully with the Oslo agreements and to refrain from all unilateral measures and actions that might compromise the outcome of the final status negotiations. The construction of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories contributes negatively to the peace process; and we call upon the Government of Israel to desist from pursuing such a policy.

The signing of the Wye River Memorandum on 23 October 1998 between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is a welcome development in the efforts to resurrect the peace process from stalemate. It is the ardent hope of my delegation that the Wye River spirit of cooperation and understanding will contribute in no small measure to the implementation of the accords previously reached between the two parties. The Israelis and the Palestinians should now be working towards the final status negotiations without which a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine would remain a pipe dream.

Finally, a solution to the question of Palestine has never been closer. The uncompromising position of the State of Israel with regard to its security needs has certainly contributed to slowing the peace process. Admittedly, Israel has legitimate security concerns and has the right to live in safety within secure boundaries, but this right must not be realized by means which could make the people of Palestine lose trust and confidence in the leadership of the Palestinian Authority.

**Mr. Nahid** (Bangladesh): Today the United Nations is observing the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. It is therefore fitting that the Assembly is considering the question of Palestine today. With your permission, Mr. President, we will include our comments on the situation in the Middle East, which comes under agenda item 40 in this statement.

For the last half century, the question of Palestine has been discussed in this Assembly, and the international community has repeatedly called upon Israel to halt its illegal activities, end its occupation of and vacate Arab and Palestinian territories. Foreign occupation in itself constitutes a flagrant violation of human rights. Prolonged occupation only worsens the process.

The Israeli occupation of Palestine and other Arab territories represents an utter violation of and persistent disregard for international law. In the occupied territories, Israel is continuing with its agenda of suppressing resistance against occupation. In doing so, it applies tactics that generate various forms of human rights violations. The actions of individuals continue to result in massive retaliations by the Israelis, in the form of collective punishments such as blockades, the demolition of houses, the confiscation of property and collective searches.

We firmly believe that for a lasting peace in the Middle East, the question of Palestine needs to be addressed seriously. Nothing short of the peaceful settlement of the Palestine question will help in resolving the crisis of the Middle East. The inalienable rights of the Palestinian people must be recognized and realized. Israeli withdrawal from all Palestinian and occupied Arab territories, including the Golan, is essential for any meaningful progress in the peace process. Meanwhile, Israel must stop immediately all settlement plans in Palestine and the occupied Arab territories.

Israeli settlement in the occupied territories has always been a serious source of tension. We are disappointed to know that there have been 194 Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. Of those 194 settlements, 67 have been expanded or built since the signing of the Oslo accords. It is regrettable that instead of continuing the process of freezing settlement activities, in February 1997 Israel authorized the building of new settlements, including the one in Jebel Abu Ghneim in East Jerusalem. The completion of this settlement will result in Arab-populated East Jerusalem being fully encircled by settlement chains. This will eventually have a significant effect on the demography of East Jerusalem.

The Israeli decision with regard to the expansion of the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem was discussed in the Security Council in June 1998. The international community urged Israel to refrain from the implementation of its decision, as such a plan would create an increased Jewish majority in the city, and disturb the moratorium imposed by the Council. We are concerned at Israeli decisions to designate its settlement activities as a national priority. This is another attempt at deliberate encroachment and at the provocation of the sentiments of the people of the occupied territories. Such actions are in no way favourable to the Middle East peace process.

Similarly, the confiscation of land, the restriction of access to water resources and the demolition of houses in the occupied Palestinian and Arab territories, including the Golan, will in no way bring the desired peace to the region. The indiscriminate destruction of lives and properties in southern Lebanon has become a routine affair.

Bangladesh expresses its utter condemnation of the Israeli policy of systematic violation of basic human rights in the occupied territories. We express our total solidarity with our Palestinian and Arab brothers in this regard. We would like to remind Israel that under the 1949 Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, and under relevant resolutions, Israel is obliged to guarantee the basic human rights of the people under its occupation. The Security Council, in 25 of its resolutions adopted over the years, has reconfirmed its recognition of the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention in the territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem. Hence, there is no scope for unilateral refusals.

We call upon Israel to terminate completely its occupation of Palestine and other Arab territories, including Jerusalem, without delay. That would be a significant step forward in the realization of peace in the region. We believe that the developments following the Wye River Memorandum are promising. Bangladesh would like to underscore the need for the implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978), which form the basis of the Middle East peace process, as well as other subsequent agreements reached among the parties aimed at the resolution of the problem. We also reaffirm our conviction that the Palestine issue is the core of the Middle East problem.

Allow me to quote from the message of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People:

> "On this day, the people of Bangladesh once again join me in reaffirming our support and total commitment to the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including the right to self-determination, the right to national independence and sovereignty and the right to their homes and land."

In conclusion, Bangladesh reaffirms that the United Nations has a permanent responsibility with respect to the question of Palestine and the other Arab territories under occupation by Israel until a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement is reached. We believe that the active involvement of the United Nations and the international community is essential for the successful outcome of the peace efforts.

**Mr. Samhan Al-Nuaimi** (United Arab Emirates) (*interpretation from Arabic*): It gives me pleasure, on behalf of the delegation of the United Arab Emirates, to express our appreciation to Ambassador Ka and the members of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for their efforts and support with regard to the question of Palestine and the latest developments there.

Despite the fact that more than five decades have passed since the inclusion of the question of Palestine on the agenda of the General Assembly, the issue is still characterized by political complexity as one phase succeeds another — the logical result of the policies of illegal settlerist occupation conducted by Israel in order to achieve its own expansionist aspirations within the occupied Palestinian and Arab territories.

It is frustrating that, despite the fact that relevant General Assembly resolutions were adopted by a majority of votes on this issue, foremost among them resolution 181 (II) of 1947, on the partition of Palestine into two States, one Palestinian and the other Israeli, in addition to other resolutions reaffirming the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to establish their own State with its capital in Jerusalem, successive Israeli Governments have flagrantly violated their commitments. This attests without any doubt to the aspirations of Israel to remain as a Power of occupation that conducts its policies on the basis of settlement and expansion in the occupied territories, changing the historical, legal and demographic character of the land at the expense of the original Arab inhabitants and committing one violation after another in the Holy City of Jerusalem, which has a history and a culture of religious tolerance, coexistence and peace.

The peace process was launched in Madrid in 1991, based on resolutions of international legitimacy and on the principle of land for peace. The Arab States have chosen this strategic option in order to establish a peaceful, just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine and to the problems in the Middle East. That process has enjoyed the unconditional support of the entire international community.

Regrettably that march for peace has encountered clear obstacles deliberately placed in its path by the

Israeli authorities through guidelines and actions that run counter to the letter, spirit and provisions of the agreements that have been reached with the Palestinian Authority. The most dangerous of these obstacles takes the form of repeated attempts to renege on previous commitments or not to respect the time-frame for their implementation through continuation of the illegal settler and expansionist policies in the occupied territories, particularly in the Holy City of Jerusalem, as well as other dangerous practices such as detention, closures, violence, murder, confiscation of land and natural resources and rescinding the residency rights of indigenous Arab citizens.

All these actions have created a state of insecurity and instability in the occupied territories. Despite the welcoming by the international community of the Wye River Memorandum recently concluded in Washington, D.C., as another positive development aimed at reviving the peace process after two years of stagnation, we note with deep regret that the Israeli Government continues its attempts to shirk its responsibilities based on the provisions of that Memorandum through prevarication and procrastination, through delays in the implementation of the pledges it has made under the agreement. This is particularly so with regard to the release of all Palestinian political detainees, implementation of additional measures in the field of authority transfer, operation of the Palestinian infrastructure, redeployment in the West Bank and the cessation of all other unilateral activities aimed at imposing a fait accompli before the negotiations on the final status.

Of particular concern in this context is the permission granted by the Government of Israel for the formation of armed militias among the Jewish settlers, a matter which points up the Government's lack of concern for the consequences and its continuing consolidation of a state of occupation and settler activities.

Although we greatly appreciate the efforts made by the United States to lead the process to success, we look forward to the doubling of those efforts so as to force the Israeli Government to immediately cease all violations and to implement scrupulously all its political, legal and ethical commitments vis à vis the Palestinian people and its national Authority. This is in accordance with the time-frame agreed to in preparation for the negotiations on the final status, including Jerusalem, refugees, the settlements, the boundaries, security and the like, in a manner that would guarantee to the Palestinian people the exercise of its legitimate right to self-determination and to the declaration of establishment of its own independent State with its capital in Holy Jerusalem.

We believe that the unjust economic measures imposed by the Government of Israel every now and then on the Palestinian and Arab peoples within the occupied territories, including the economic embargo, restricting the freedom of movement of people and of goods and attempts to confiscate or destroy crops and other similar measures are a form of collective punishment. Such measures run counter to the provisions of international and humanitarian laws and the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. We would therefore to call on the international community represented by the United Nations and its specialized agencies, as well as the sponsors of the peace process and other relevant parties, foremost among which is the European Union, to bring pressure to bear on the Israeli Government in order to put an immediate end to its continued violations, particularly now as the United Nations is preparing to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights.

We also call upon donor countries and the international development and financial institutions to promote all kinds of assistance, social and economic, to the Palestinian people in order to enable it to establish its own national institutions and realize its own sustainable development, improve its living conditions and the deteriorating state of its health-care and education systems, just like other peoples of world. International statistics reaffirm that the social and economic conditions of the Palestinian people were better at the beginning of the peace process than at present.

The peace process continues to face a stalemate on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks due to the intransigence of the Israeli Government and its refusal to implement all the commitments that were reaffirmed by relevant resolutions of international legitimacy on the basis of land for peace.

We support international efforts aiming at continuing the peace process on all its different tracks. Thus we call upon Israel to implement all its commitments, foremost of which is its full withdrawal from all occupied territories, including the Syrian Golan and southern Lebanon and to rescind all administrative measures deliberately adopted in order to annex the Syrian Arab Golan. Israel should also cease its other settler activities such as confiscation of land and water resources and the expulsion of Arab inhabitants. Furthermore, we urge the

international community to double its efforts to press the Israeli Government to resume the negotiations unconditionally on those two tracks from the point where they ceased, based on the provisions of the Madrid Conference and on the principle of land for peace.

We would also like to call upon Israel to put an immediate end to the cycle of violence and indiscriminate bombing that is daily perpetrated against the villages of south Lebanon and the western Bekaa and to release all Lebanese detainees who have languished in its prisons for years for no crime other than defending themselves and their occupied territories, which are causes endorsed by the principles of international legitimacy.

Today, as the United Nations commemorates another International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, the United Arab Emirates reaffirms its support for the Palestinian people and its just struggle for self-determination and for the establishment of an independent State of its own with holy Jerusalem as its capital. We reaffirm that the only just, lasting and comprehensive solution is one based on the resolutions of international legitimacy, particularly Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978). Confidence-building measures should be undertaken, foreign occupation ended and the rule of law applied. Moreover, there must be action to resolve all pending problems in a legal and peaceful manner, through the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. Our goal must be the attainment of the aspirations of the States and peoples of the region to security, stability and sustainable development.

**Mr. Gold** (Israel): Nations arise over a certain land because of their historical experience, which preserves them as a distinct people over time, attaches them to a defined territory and allows them to be empowered with self-government. For centuries, the people of Israel were forcibly denied the latter quality of their nationhood. However, their connection with their land and with Jerusalem was never severed even as a succession of empires occupied Israel after the Roman legions of Vespasian and Titus thought they had put an end to Jewish political independence.

Indeed, the Jewish people's quest to actively recover their land never ceased. Self-government was restored, against all odds, in the year 132, in the year 351 and yet again in the year 614. The heroism of these struggles has left its mark on places like Betar, near Jerusalem, Gamla, in the Golan Heights, and Massada, over the Dead Sea.

The potentially destabilizing example of this incessant drive for human freedom and its universal message to all vanquished peoples prompted the Roman emperor Hadrian to forbid Jewish residence in Jerusalem, a law scrupulously followed by nearly all of his Byzantine successors. Furthermore, it was Hadrian who decided to rename the province of Judea as Syria-Palestine, with the purpose of erasing the memory of Jewish political independence forever.

But the memory could not be erased. Despite their forced eviction and dispersion, the Jewish people, across the centuries, streamed back to their homeland, limited only by the power of its imperial custodians to deny them access. Jewish centres were restored in Safed, Tiberias, Hebron and Jerusalem as Spanish Jewish exiles arrived in the sixteenth century. A Jewish plurality was restored to Jerusalem in the early nineteenth century, while a clear Jewish majority in Jerusalem was reached in the year 1864.

This historical experience cannot be divorced from the general debate over the Israeli-Palestinian question. For this debate, which today is focused on the respective rights of the parties in the disputed territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, cannot be based on the most recent General Assembly resolutions alone. The reality conveyed by the deliberate use of politically loaded adjectives in these resolutions reflect far more what United Nations bloc voting will sustain than what is historically true.

For example, the choice of terminology such as "occupied Palestinian territory" suggests a straightforward problem: that a sovereign Palestinian Arab state once existed; that Israel, like a European colonial Power, invaded its territory; and that now Israel must simply withdraw from that same territory to restore the Palestinian state. Indeed, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat evoked to the General Assembly this fall

> "the need to realize justice for the Palestinian people, in order to regain their international status and their seat at the United Nations". (*A/53/PV.18, p. 13*)

Yet reality, according to the relevant international instruments governing this long conflict, is very different. The respective rights of the parties in the territory under dispute can only be understood if three basic sources are examined: the events surrounding decisions in 1947 and 1948, the aftermath of the Six-Day War, including

Security Council resolution 242 (1967), and finally the Oslo Agreements.

With the formal demise of the Ottoman Empire, the League of Nations, which was the source of international legitimacy in the first part of this century, acknowledged the absolute rights of the Jewish people to their land. In fact, in the Mandate for Palestine, the League of Nations confirmed that recognition had been given to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country. Significantly, the League of Nations did not confer a right upon the Jewish people; it recognized a pre-existing right. That right, moreover, was preserved by its successor organization, the United Nations, which, in accordance with Article 80 of the Charter, established that nothing should be

> "construed ... to alter in any manner the rights whatsoever of any states or any peoples or the terms of existing international instruments to which Members of the United Nations may respectively be parties".

Thus, the United Nations did not revoke pre-existing rights or confer new rights of sovereignty when the advice of the General Assembly was sought in 1947 under Article 10 of the Charter. The recommendation came in the form of General Assembly resolution 181 (II) of 29 November 1947. While the national leadership of the Jewish community in British mandatory Palestine accepted the proposed partition plan, not only did the Arab Higher Committee and the Arab League members present categorically reject resolution 181 (II), but six countries later admitted the use of armed force to forcibly prevent its implementation.

After Israel declared its independence on 15 May 1948, it was in fact immediately invaded by these six armies, most of which had been supplied by the European colonial Powers: Egypt, joined by a Saudi contingent, advanced to Ashdod in the West and to the southern outskirts of Jerusalem in the East. The Lebanese and Syrian armies moved against Israel's North. The Iraqi army occupied western Samaria and reached Rosh Ha-Ayin, near Tel Aviv. Transjordanian forces nearly cut off Jerusalem from the coast and seized the eastern half of the city.

In the Old City of Jerusalem, the Jewish population was expelled, while 58 synagogues, including the Hurva Synagogue, built in 1267, were destroyed or desecrated. The United Nations regime for Jerusalem, set out in resolution 181 (II), did nothing for its people or for the protection of its holy sites. Only determined Israeli convoys broke Jerusalem's siege to supply food and water for thousands of the city's residents.

Had it not been for the armed rejection of resolution 181 (II), thousands of Israelis would not have lost their lives in the 1948 War of Independence. Had it not been for the determined invasion of the Arab States, the tragedy of the Palestinian Arab refugees during those same years would never have occurred.

As a result of the war, the Gaza Strip came under Egyptian military administration. In 1950 Jordan annexed the West Bank, an act recognized only by Great Britain and Pakistan. No demands to restore a Palestinian State were brought before the United Nations in the year that followed with respect to these territories that were under Egyptian and Jordanian occupation. Nevertheless, these developments completely changed the circumstances upon which the recommendations contained in resolution 181 (II) were based. In short, resolution 181 (II) was made moribund by the violent rejection of the Arab League, not by the decision of the State of Israel.

The most important of these new circumstances immediately became clear to Israel at the time. The struggle for the re-establishment of Jewish statehood was not just an inter-communal conflict between Jews and Arabs in what was once British Mandatory Palestine, but rather entailed the direct strategic involvement of the regular armies of the surrounding Arab States. This was underlined again within 20 years, in May 1967, when Israel's neighbours formed another coalition under Egyptian command, massing their armies along its borders in what they called then a war of annihilation. Again, Iraqi expeditionary forces swept across Jordan and prepared to cross into the West Bank as hostilities began on 5 June.

Israeli army units entered the West Bank during the Six Day War that followed for only one reason: Israel was attacked along this front with intense artillery bombardment that struck Jerusalem, Israeli airfields, such as Ramat David, and major cities. Jordanian ground units backed with heavy armour that were concentrated in the West Bank actually crossed the ceasefire lines set in 1949. Thus, Israel took control of territory from which it was attacked in a clear-cut war of defence.

The United Nations debate that followed the Six Day War reflected this fundamental fact, for Security Council resolution 242 (1967), which was adopted on 22 November 1967, laid down two critical principles that had to be applied in order to reach a just and lasting peace. First, reference to the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict meant that Israel was not expected to pull out of all of the territories that it had entered. Secondly, the resolution explicitly acknowledged Israel's right to secure and recognized borders.

These two principles were complementary, since secure borders required mutually agreed territorial modifications. As United States Ambassador Arthur Goldberg told the Security Council on 15 November 1967,

> "Historically there have never been secure or recognized boundaries in the area. Neither the armistice lines of 1949 nor the cease-fire lines of 1967 have answered that description". (*Official Records of the Security Council, 1377th meeting, para. 65*)

A full Israeli withdrawal was clearly not envisioned. As George Brown, the British Foreign Secretary in 1967, subsequently told *The Jerusalem Post* on 23 January 1970,

> "The proposal said 'Israel will withdraw from territories that were occupied', and not from 'the' territories, which means that Israel will not withdraw from all the territories."

Resolution 242 (1967) clearly required a negotiation, underscored in resolution 338 (1973), to establish where these secure borders would be.

Yet today a disturbing anomaly is occurring. While the Security Council established in resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) that secure borders had to be negotiated between the parties, the General Assembly is predetermining the outcome of these proposed negotiations by defining the disputed territory as already being Palestinian. On the one hand, the United Nations has provided resolutions that have served as the basis for the Madrid Peace Conference and the Oslo accords. On the other hand, it is adopting resolutions in another body that undermine these very negotiations.

When Jordan relinquished its administrative ties to the West Bank on 31 July 1988, Israel could have proposed that it fill the vacuum by asserting its own claims of sovereignty. The rights of the Jewish people to the territories were, after all, embedded in the League of Nations mandate and were not altered by events surrounding United Nations resolution 181 (II). The aftermath of the Six Day War further reinforced this claim, since Israel entered the West Bank only in the exercise of its lawful right to self-defence, in contrast to the previous custodians. Fully aware of its historical and legal rights, Israel nonetheless opted for a process of negotiations to resolve the final status of these disputed territories, both through the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and the Oslo agreements with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Israel has chosen the path of negotiations for two reasons. First, Israel is committed to reaching peace with its neighbours. Secondly, Israel is determined not to rule another people against their will. In fact, Oslo has led to a situation whereby 98 per cent of the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are today under the administration of the Palestinian Authority, and not under the administration of Israel. But the fundamental underpinning of Oslo, as well as Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), is that issues be resolved only through negotiations between the parties. The Oslo II Interim Agreement is explicit in this regard:

> "Neither side shall initiate or take any step that will change the status of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip pending the outcome of the permanent status negotiations." (*article XXXI, para. 7*)

The clear intention of this language was to preclude the unilateral declaration of a Palestinian State or the unilateral annexation of West Bank or Gaza territory by Israel, for those are the only acts that could change the legal status of these disputed territories. This commitment was made again in the recently concluded Wye River Memorandum. In the United States letter of assurances to Israel dated 29 October 1998 that accompanied the Wye River agreement, the United States also took a strong position in this regard:

> "we are stressing that those who believe that they can declare unilateral positions or take unilateral acts, when the interim period ends, are courting disaster."

Despite these specific obligations contained in Oslo, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat stated yesterday, 29 November 1998, that he plans to declare a Palestinian State on 4 May 1999. On the basis of such past

declarations, the Government of Israel took the following decision on 11 November 1998, as it approved the Wye River Memorandum:

> "a unilateral declaration by the Palestinian Authority on the establishment of a Palestinian state, prior to the achievement of a Final Status Agreement, would constitute a substantive and fundamental violation of the Interim Agreement. In the event of such a violation, the Government would consider itself entitled to take all necessary steps, including the application of Israeli rule, law and administration to settlement areas and security areas in Judea, Samaria and Gaza, as it sees fit."

Should this chain of events occur this coming May, it should come as no surprise. For its part, Israel prefers the path of a negotiated settlement to the path of unilateralism. However, should Chairman Arafat carry out this declared intention to unilaterally establish a Palestinian State, Israel will do what is necessary to protect its security, including the assurance of defensible borders, to which it is fully entitled.

**Mr. Diatta** (Niger) (*interpretation from French*): Allow me at the outset, on behalf of my delegation, to convey to the Secretary-General and the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People our deep satisfaction at the clear and comprehensive reports they have submitted on the question of Palestine.

As we are all aware, our Organization attaches high priority to this important question, which lies at the very heart of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Our consideration of it once again in the Assembly is taking place at a particularly crucial moment for the peace process begun in Madrid and translated into concrete terms by the historic Oslo accords.

It will be remembered that the Oslo accords gave rise to tremendous hopes for peace and security in the Middle East and were hailed by the entire international community as a major milestone in Israeli-Arab relations.

Unfortunately, the process quickly became deadlocked as a result of the refusal on the part of the Israeli Government to honour its commitments and of the unlawful measures it imposed on the occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem. Those measures range from the establishment of new settlements to the confiscation of Arab lands and the sealing off of Palestinian territories. This untenable situation could not but prompt Palestinian and Israeli leaders and the sponsors of the peace process to take action.

That is why the international community placed all its hopes on the negotiations that took place in recent months and which culminated in the Wye River Memorandum on 23 October 1998. My Government welcomes the successful conclusion of these particularly difficult negotiations.

We are thus glad to take this opportunity to pay tribute here, on behalf of the Government and people of Niger, to the leading role played by the President of the United States and the King of Jordan not only in bringing about a resumption of the peace talks but also in the conclusion of the Wye River Memorandum, which breathed new life into the peace process.

We believe that at this crucial juncture for the peace process, to which I referred earlier, the two parties concerned must do their utmost to maintain the renewed momentum of the peace process and that they should continue to work within the framework of the Oslo accords. In so doing, they must in particular respect the commitments they have freely entered into and refrain from taking unilateral measures contrary to international law.

Likewise, we call on the two parties to work further to foster a climate of confidence and calm, a factor we deem vital to continued negotiations on questions that are still outstanding, in particular those relating to the final status of the occupied territories, including Jerusalem.

In concluding my remarks, I wish once again to reaffirm that as far as Niger is concerned, the future of peace in the Middle East hinges above all on the full realization of the legitimate and inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, namely the right to return to their homes and recover their property and the right to self-determination, independence and national sovereignty.

The achievement of those rights will contribute decisively to a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Thus my delegation would like to express the hope that the General Assembly, which continues to bear full responsibility for the question of Palestine, will step up its efforts to ensure in the near future the achievement of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and to work towards a successful conclusion to the peace process begun at Madrid and followed up at Oslo on the basis of

resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978) and the principle of land for peace.

**Mr. Hasmy** (Malaysia): This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of Al-Nakba — the dispossession of the Palestinian people and the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of them from their land, homes and property. Today's debate on the question of Palestine is of particular significance, as it coincides with the commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. The commemoration of this auspicious occasion serves as a reminder to the international community, and this Organization in particular, of its continuing responsibility towards the Palestinian people in their quest for a just and lasting peace and security in their own homeland.

The signing of the Wye River Memorandum at Washington, D.C., on 23 October 1998 between the Chairman of the Palestinian Authority, Mr. Yasser Arafat, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu, was a welcome breakthrough in the stalled peace process. The courageous attitudes shown by both parties and the crucial role played by the Government of the United States, particularly President Clinton, in facilitating the signing of the peace agreement certainly deserve commendation. Equally deserving of our commendation was the valuable role of His Majesty King Hussein of Jordan. After almost two years of stalemate in the peace process, the Wye River Memorandum has revived hopes for lasting peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. Malaysia is gratified that the Palestinian people have celebrated the return of 13 per cent of their territory and the opening of the Gaza International Airport, yet another important symbol of Palestinian statehood and an important step towards the economic development of Palestine. The swift implementation of the interim peace agreement will certainly go a long way towards creating a conducive environment for the permanent status negotiations between the two parties.

Undoubtedly, the people of Palestine anxiously await the return of the rest of their land still under occupation. We therefore call on Israel to expeditiously withdraw from the remaining occupied Palestinian territory in order to fully realize the goals of the peace process.

While we welcome the political progress that has been made, the continuing adverse human rights situation and deteriorating socio-economic conditions of the Palestinian people in the occupied territories remain of major concern to the international community. The hardship and suffering that the Palestinians have endured over the years are well known and well documented. The living standards of Palestinians remain low, characterized by high unemployment, falling household incomes, overburdened infrastructure and restrictions on employment and mobility.

Only a comprehensive peace settlement will resolve the refugee issue. The provocative Israeli policies of confiscating Palestinian-owned lands on a massive scale and the demolition of Arab-owned houses, as well as the establishment of new Israeli settlements and the illegal expansion of existing ones in the occupied territories, have to be terminated forthwith. Given the fact that the peace process and the situation on the ground are interdependent and complementary to each other, the continued hardship faced by the Palestinian people does not augur well for the future of the Middle East peace process. The immediate amelioration of their plight is therefore an essential prerequisite to the further consolidation and promotion of the peace process.

For peace to flourish, progress in the search for a political settlement has to be accompanied by economic growth and development, in particular in the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the Palestinians in the occupied areas. In order for peace and stability to prevail in the Middle East, it is essential that repressive and discriminatory policies and actions by the occupying Power be brought to an end immediately. Such policies should be replaced by serious and honest efforts to build trust and confidence, as well as social justice and mutual security among the parties concerned. The further and immediate release of Palestinians under detention would be a step in the right direction.

My delegation wishes to take this opportunity to reaffirm Malaysia's long-standing commitment and unwavering support for the Palestinian people and their leadership. We will continue to support them in their quest for the restoration of all their inalienable rights, in particular the rights to self-determination and to establish an independent and sovereign Palestinian State in their homeland. We are confident that the Palestinian Authority, under President Yasser Arafat, will steer the Palestinian people towards this end. It is the duty of the international community to assist the Palestinian leadership and people towards the early realization of that goal.

**Mr. Sharma** (India): As we celebrate the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, the international community today underlines its support for the people of Palestine in their quest for

peace and justice and the realization of their legitimate goals and aspirations. We would like to reaffirm our solidarity with the people of Palestine and express India's principled and continuing support for their inalienable rights.

India's cherished bonds of friendship with the Palestinian people are based on civilizational links spanning almost every aspect of human endeavour — cultural, social, religious, economic and political. These links have been strengthened and reinvigorated with the passage of time. Since the time of Mahatma Gandhi, India's support for the Palestinian cause has been strong and unwavering. We have stood, and continue to stand, side by side with the people of Palestine in their struggle for the achievement of their just and legitimate national rights, which is the key to peace and stability in the Middle East. India's advocacy of the Palestinian cause is manifest in our continuous and consistent support of Palestinian issues in the United Nations and other international forums.

India has consistently advocated a peaceful solution to all disputes. The road to peace is often tortuous and strewn with impediments. What is imperative is the commitment of the parties concerned to a peaceful resolution of all outstanding problems. India has closely followed developments concerning the Middle East peace process. The signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements in September 1993, followed by the Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip two years later, and the Hebron accord of January 1997, were courageous initial steps by visionaries aiming to put an end to the saga of feuding and bloodshed and to usher in a new era of peace, stability and coexistence in the region, free of animosity and friction.

We welcome the Wye River Memorandum signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) last month. Notwithstanding the various difficulties that have emerged in the peace process, the commitment of the principal parties to pursue the goal of peace deserves to be commended. India has urged that unilateral action should be eschewed and has advocated faithful implementation of the Memorandum, signed in Washington. As Prime Minister Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee stated in his message on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, India believes that the Memorandum will improve the quality of life of the Palestinian people and pave the way to the commencement of final status negotiations so that a just, lasting and comprehensive peace can be achieved in the region on the basis of the principle of land for peace and the relevant United Nations resolutions. Former adversaries can one day become partners in the cause of peace.

There is a general recognition that, together with political support for the peace process, there is need to focus on the multifaceted tasks of nation-building. The fledgling Palestinian Authority requires generous assistance, particularly in the fields of health, education and creation of employment. Infrastructural development is an area of critical importance. The challenges confronting the people of Palestine are also challenges for the international community and merit its urgent attention and support. Regional cooperation, complemented by international efforts, is an essential prerequisite for enhancing peace and prosperity in the region.

India will continue, within our resource constraints, to extend material and technical assistance to the people of Palestine to consolidate their progress towards self-government and nation-building. We seek to assist the Palestinian people through scholarships and exchange programmes. We offered more than 50 specialized training slots in 1996-97 at an estimated cost of 5.5 million rupees. India also pledged $1 million at the Washington Donors Conference in October 1995 and another $1 million at the subsequent pledging conference in Paris in January 1996.

These pledges are being utilized both for the provision of goods and for undertaking projects in the Palestinian National Authority territory. We have also offered to set up a common facility centre for imparting training in vocational activities such as software development, computer programming and computerized numerically controlled machines. India has also been contributing to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and has given Rs 225,000 for 1998.

While the international community must assist in realizing the cherished objective of peace and prosperity in the region, the actual impetus for a permanent and lasting solution will have to come from the parties themselves. The recent success in charting a course through the minefield of stillborn initiatives and hurdles once again rekindles hope. We trust that the wisdom and sagacity displayed, resulting in a momentum towards peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence, will continue to guide future negotiations. We trust in a successful and just outcome.

*The meeting rose at 5.50 p.m.*